



NEWS

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PRESIDENT SIGNS BILL EXTENDING FUNDING FOR POPULAR WETLANDS CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Continued funding for wetlands and wildlife conservation grants was ensured on October 30 when President Bill Clinton signed a bill that extends the Congressional authorization of funding for the North American Wetlands Conservation Act's grants program.

Under this "reauthorization," Congress will be able to appropriate up to \$30 million for each of the next 5 years to fund the North American grants program. This program supports wetlands protection, restoration, and enhancement projects in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The act's purpose is to provide funding for the conservation of wetlands benefitting migratory birds and the other species of fish and wildlife that depend upon these habitats.

"Migratory birds know no boundaries," notes Jamie Rappaport Clark, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency that administers the grants program. "Waterfowl, songbirds, and shorebirds nesting in Alaska and Canada migrate through Canada and the contiguous United States to wintering grounds in the southern states and Mexico. If we are going to conserve migratory birds to benefit the U.S. public, we have to think in terms of supporting habitat conservation across the continent."

"While the act was intended to benefit wildlife," Clark adds, "people also reap rewards. Wetlands abate flood damage, recharge groundwater supplies, filter pollutants from water sources, and reduce erosion and shoreline damage. The most obvious benefit to most people is the recreational opportunities that wetlands offer: boating, fishing, hunting, birdwatching, and photography. Partners are excited about the act's program because it is non-regulatory and landowners involved in a project have the final say as to what will be done on their property. All creatures great and small win with this program."

What makes this program unique is that taxpayer dollars, in the form of grants, are matched by conservation partnerships. The law requires a minimum 1-to-1 match; however, since 1991 partnerships have exceeded the requirement by more than 2-to-1. To date, some 1,000 partners, including environmental groups, sportsmen's groups, corporations, farmers and ranchers, small businesses, and private citizens, have been involved in 610 projects under the act. Projects have been approved for funding on public and private lands in 48 of the United States, all of the Canadian provinces, and 19 Mexican states. Thus far, grants total \$277 million; total partner contributions amount to \$659 million.

The act's continental approach to conservation also makes it stand out from other Federal conservation programs. Act partners have acquired, restored, or enhanced approximately 7.5 million acres of wetlands and associated uplands in the United States and Canada. More than 25.8 million acres in Mexico's large biosphere reserves have been affected through conservation education and management plan projects.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.